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REAGAN RESHAPING CONTRA AID DEBATE

Aides Say the President Will Back Democracy's Return, Not a Military Victory

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WASHINGTON, May 2 — President Reagan will seek to redefine the legislative debate over United States aid to the contras by muting a desire for military aid to overthrow the Sandinista Government, White House officials said today.

In what one called a "repositioning," the officials said Mr. Reagan would lobby instead for the assistance in a broader context that stresses as its main objective the returning of democracy to Nicaragua and not a military victory for the rebels.

The officials said the new strategy reflected recognition by the Administration that it had now become more difficult to secure continued United States funding for the rebels, known as contras, and that it is unlikely to win a new \$105 million aid request based just on providing military assistance.

"He's going more toward the diplomatic side," a senior White House official said. "What we want to do is to try to give a clear choice to the American people that makes it clear that the choices are democracy or totalitarianism. We assume they will then take democracy."

Reagan to Speak in New York

Mr. Reagan is to unveil the new approach in a speech Sunday to the American Newspaper Publishers Association that will be delivered on Ellis Island in New York Harbor.

White House officials have billed the speech as major and as one intended to enunciate an important policy position to Congress, the Sandinistas and the American people.

"We want to send a strong message about our support for democracy in Nicaragua and the timing is such that it sends the message to a lot of different people," said Marlin Fitzwater, the White House spokesman.

Another official who is familiar with the speech, said while Mr. Reagan would indicate that he was firmly committed to aiding the rebels, other elements are important in bringing democracy to Nicaragua including economic and diplomatic measures.

'A Different Wrapping'

"He will be packaging the arguments in a different wrapping," said the official.

Mr. Reagan had requested \$105 million in assistance for the Nicaraguan insurgents in the budget that he proposed to Congress for the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1. Officials have said privately that it will be difficult to win approval with Democratic majorities now in both houses of the Congress and the revelations that profits from the sale of arms to Iran might have been secretly funneled to the rebels.

In March, the House voted, 230 to 196, to halt a \$40 million payment to the contras until Mr. Reagan accounted for all money spent on their behalf so far, including money from the Iranian arms sales. But the Senate rejected a similar measure, 52 to 48.

Administration officials are concerned that Congress is now positioned to assume control of Central American policy unless the President can convince a majority to follow his lead.

Striving to Avoid Doubts

In addition, by not advancing a policy goal of overthrowing Managua, Mr. Reagan hopes to avoid Congressional and public doubts over whether the contras as a military force can win. The contras have been plagued by leadership squabbles and resignations.

The White House officials said Mr. Reagan had been convinced of the need to reframe the debate after he received a letter several weeks ago from three Republican senators, whose support had been critical in gaining the \$100 million Congress approved for the rebels last year. The three, William S. Cohen of Maine, Nancy L. Kassebaum of Kansas and Warren Rudman of New Hampshire, had urged the President to pursue more vigorously a diplomatic solution.

In addition, the officials said the new strategy reflected the style of the new White House staff, under Howard H. Baker Jr. The former White House communications director, Patrick J. Buchanan, had sought to make support for the contras a test of support for Mr. Reagan or for the Sandinistas.

While officials were reluctant to provide details on Mr. Reagan's speech, they said the significance would be on the emphasis he placed on his desire for a diplomatic solution rather than overthrowing the Sandinista Government. He has never stated such an overthrow as his policy objective, but has come close on several occasions, saying once, for example, that his aim was to make the Sandinistas say "uncle."

'The Style' Is the Factor

"The difference now might not be so much in what he is saying, but in the style in says it and the emphasis he places on other elements," said one Reagan aide.

Under the new approach, the officials said, Mr. Reagan will stress that his goal is a diplomatic solution and that Managua must make internal moves toward democracy that it has promised. Officials said they believed that a consensus in Congress existed for those goals.

The military assistance to the contras will then be urged in the context as a necessity to pressure the Sandinistas on both fronts, they said.

"In the last two months, a great deal of the members in Congress have raised questions about what we are doing on the diplomatic track," said another senior aide. "We want to emphasize, explain and highlight that."